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Dry Conditions Spark Need for Water Conservation

Glenwood Springs, CO - Snowpack levels well below normal bode for a tight water supply in the Colorado River Basin this summer. The average snowpack in Western Colorado, which drains into the mainstem of the Colorado River, is about 40% of its 30-year average. The spring run-off will vary from 26% to 60% of normal. Warm spring conditions are contributing to additional loss of runoff water because of evaporation and water being more quickly absorbed into the dry ground.

This winter marks the third season in a row of below average precipitation for the state of Colorado. Many reservoirs were unable to completely fill after last spring's run-off period and arrive at this warm, dry spring below normal levels. However, water storage throughout Colorado is designed to withstand a series of dry years, so most municipal water supplies are considered in good condition going into the summer.

Colorado, which only receives about 17 inches of precipitation on a statewide average, frequently encounters cycles of dry weather. During the last century, 5 periods of extended dryness were recorded, stretching from 12 years in duration to only 2 years. From 1979 through 1998, Colorado experienced a period of unusually wet conditions that lasted for 19 years. The last significant dry period on record was from 1975 through 1978 and was punctuated by the 1977 drought; the driest year of the last half-century. This year's dry condition may surpass 1977's.

Hard hit by these dry conditions will be water-based recreation and agriculture. The run-off period is expected to come early, be light and end quickly, creating below-average boating conditions on river and streams that do not benefit from water releases from dams and reservoirs. Some fisheries may be harmed by low flows and higher water temperatures on stretches that historically run low or dry-out during drought periods. This will result in poorer fishing conditions and smaller fish populations on some river stretches. Irrigated agriculture will be difficult for junior water rights holders in many areas of the state. There will not be enough water in the rivers this year to support the water demands of all water users, resulting in junior water rights being curtailed.

Due to the increased scarcity of water supplies throughout the state heading into the heat of

summer, water consumers are asked to examine their water usage and eliminate wasteful and inefficient practices. Over half of all water use on municipal systems during the summer season goes to “urban irrigation” to maintain green lawns and gardens. Significant water savings can be made by using more efficient watering techniques and growing less water consumptive vegetation. Wasteful water uses, such as hosing down sidewalks instead of sweeping with a broom, should be eliminated.

Long-range weather forecasting does point to a potential for dry conditions to ease later this summer and for the possibility of wet El Nino conditions returning towards next winter. However, predicting how an El Nino may actually impact Colorado’s weather is a very inexact science.

The Colorado River Water Conservation District is working to expand water storage capabilities in several areas throughout the Colorado River Basin to firm up water supplies in preparation for future dry years. Eighty percent of Colorado’s surface water supply is produced from melting snow during the months of May, June and July. Capturing this snowmelt water, is the key to surviving dry periods, such as the state is presently experiencing.

The expansion of Elkhead Reservoir, northeast of the town of Craig, will provide a stable supply of water for the residents of the region and allow for higher flows in the Yampa River for the recovery of endangered fish and other aquatic species. Recently completed storage at Eagle Park Reservoir, at the headwaters of the Eagle River, will secure a larger water supply for Eagle County residents and maintain higher flows in the Eagle River. The River District is also examining additional water storage options on the North Fork of the Gunnison and elsewhere.

The senior water rights of the Shoshone hydroelectric power plant and the senior agricultural water rights in the Grand Valley will contribute to predictable floating conditions throughout the summer on the Colorado River in Glenwood Canyon. Summer releases from Green Mountain, Woford Mountain and Williams Fork reservoirs to agricultural irrigation rights on the western reaches of the Colorado will keep flows up on the Colorado River to the benefit of rafters and kayakers. Water releases from Ruedi Reservoir for the benefit of endangered fish species in the Colorado River will keep flows high and water temperatures low in the Fryingpan, Roaring Fork and Colorado River, enhancing trout habitat in those river stretches. Gunnison River flows will be enhanced by regular releases from the West Slope’s largest water storage project - Blue Mesa Reservoir.

Without the present water storage network on the West Slope, this year’s dry conditions would have been catastrophic for both people and wildlife combined. The Colorado River Water Conservation District will continue to protect the West Slope’s water supply, as it has done since 1937, and look for new ways to augment water storage for the benefit of western Colorado’s growing population.

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